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ABSTRACT

The U. S. Commissioner of Education discusses how State boards of education can make themselves more effective on behalf of many critically important causes in U.S. education today. He argues that State boards must take a tough, unequivocal position on some of the gross inequities that have stood for so long. Additionally, the five most critical problems and performance gaps on which State activism should focus are school finance equity, school district organization and boundaries, collective bargaining in education, education of handicapped children, and performance accountability in education. (Author/WM)

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THE CHALL LENGE OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP:

State Boards and Results Oriented Management*

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by
U. S. T. H. Bell
Commissioner of Education

I would like first of f all to express my appreciation for your invitation to deliver this convention's opening address. My sense of the strategic importance of leadership by State boards of education, and my longstanding concern with the problems of education leadership in our country, make this opportunity a particularly gratifying one for me.

Last year at your annual convention I spoke to you as Superintendent of the Granite School District, Salt Lake City, and I was seeking your support for a new role in early childhood development services for the neighborhood elementary school. Speaking this year as U.S. Commissioner, I want to talk about how I think the State boards can make themselves known and felt and effective on behalf of that cause and many others of critical importance in U.S. education today.

I must concede in advance that I know this is State business. Some of you may say that, as the U.S. Commissioner of Education, I should keep my nose in the Federal arena. But I think I have a responsibility to express my views and to call attention to education problems on all levels -- Federal, State, and local. There are a number of extremely critical areas where the States have been negligent. I can't miss an opportunity such as this to tell you of these shortcomings -- as I perceive them to be -- and to urge you to become aggressive advocates for change.

Speaking of this, I am convinced that State boards of education must take a tough, utterly unequivocal position on some of the gross inequities that we have let stand for so long.

I believe you must be more than advocates for improvements in education. I believe you must be activists.

Activism is the policy or practice of doing things with decision and energy and emphasizing aggressive activity. It is in that sense that I believe that State boards of education must become activists -- zealous activists. You must use your legal powers and your moral and persuasive leadership.

The five most critical problems and performance gaps upon which your activism should focus are these:

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1. School finance equity
2. School district organization and boundaries
3. Collective bargaining in education
4. Education of handicapped children
5. Performance accountability in education

School finance equity stands as a problem we all recognize. We agree that the differences in local property tax revenues available per student from one school district to another represent the most blatant injustice. But it's like the weather. We all talk about school finance inequities, but no one seems willing to do much about it. The matter has gone to the U.S. Supreme Court and back to the halls of the State legislatures. But in many States this problem remains as it was 40 years ago.

No State board of education should tolerate the injustice foisted upon school children through an inadequate or non-existent school finance formula. This is not a problem found in a few of the States. It is the single most pressing problem in most of the States. So I take this opportunity to stand before you in this convention of all the State boards of education to urge you, in the strongest and most compelling language that I can use -- Please take up this challenge.

Please stand tall and tough and speak to your legislators and governors in an increasingly loud voice on this matter.

What are the elements of a good State school finance formula?

It must assure a reasonable level of financial support to cover the costs of educating every child in the State regardless of the property tax base.

It must provide a broad and diversified source of revenue, with the property tax being just one thread in the fabric. The formula should recognize and give added weighting for added burdens that some school districts have because of large numbers of disadvantaged children. It must be weighted for the added costs of educating handicapped children and non-English speaking children. It must be weighted for school transportation problems that may be more intense in one district than in another.

A good school finance formula should give incentives for quality in education. Recognition should be given for quality programs in vocational and career education. There should be incentives to meet the special needs of the gifted and talented children in a State. And incentives in the finance formula should strengthen school library, counselling, and guidance services.

This may sound very complex, but the matter of building a sound school finance formula is actually quite simple. By using a weighted pupil unit,

or a weighted classroom unit, one can work the elements of an ideal program into the formula. Some excellent studies have been done on school finance. They are available for your use and for adaptation to the unique circumstances of your State.

The difficult problem is to overcome political and special interest opposition. Your great challenge is to organize your legislative power structure to push through the courageous and necessary moves that will lead to equity, justice, and reform. Until every one of the 50 State education systems builds its house on the solid foundation of a modern school finance formula, much of whatever else we do will slip and slide for lack of this firm and lasting support.

We have been searching for equity and fairness and for equality of opportunity though the sixties and thus far in the seventies. We have been seeking these things for all our people as we attempt to put action behind the great words of our Constitution and the Bill of Rights. But this great equity movement will not see its full fruition until the State legislatures enact school finance laws that are fair and just and cognizant of the varied needs of our people.

Every child in every one of the 50 States is entitled to an education that meets his or her particular needs. This all begins with our State finance formulas. We should insist on the right ingredients in the formula, and we must make sure that our concept of equity looks at the unique needs of the student population of each school district.

School district organization and boundaries represent the second problem area requiring the attention of State boards of education.

We have far too many school districts in the United States. Many small, administratively weak and costly school systems should be reorganized and consolidated into larger, more efficient units. On the other hand, we have same monstrously large school systems that should be broken down into units of more reasonable size. We have some huge metropolitan areas covering many school districts that should be reorganized into units reflecting more economic, social, ethnic, and racial balance.

As I attempt to place before the State boards of education of the Nation an agenda for action, I must include high on the list this entire matter of school consolidation, decentralization (in the case of the huge systems), and reorganization.

Many of our school district boundaries don't make any sense. They have stood too long. They need the attention of active and courageous State boards whose commitments to education are so strong that the fights inherent in changing district boundaries are engaged in with pleasure, strength, and unity.

The wrath of those who oppose these necessary changes must be matched by your righteous wrath, a wrath that tells you that you can no longer -- in good conscience -- neglect your duty as a State board member with a solemn obligation to stand up for progress and for sound educational practice.

It's time to consolidate the small districts and change the boundaries in our great metropolitan areas. It's time to set up our school systems to face the future. This isn't easy. You know you will be attacked and will be the center of a big brawl. But the time is ripe, and you and your State board colleagues will feel, deep down inside, that you are doing what ought to be done.

The greatest joy in life is the joy of accomplishment. If your board unites behind a great drive to finance your schools as you know they should be financed and reorganize them as common sense and good judgment tell you, your service on the board will be very gratifying. Your tender wounds and scratches will actually feel good to you. This is what school board service is all about. It's the reason you are here right now.

I turn now to the third problem area: Collective Bargaining in Education.

Teacher and school employee organization for bargaining purposes is here to stay. Teacher militancy has emerged in its present form over the past few years, and collective bargaining in education is fast becoming a fact of life in many States. The regulation of this process is a matter of law in some States, but a significant number of States have let this new fact of life grow up without a framework of law to confer a measure of rationality on the process and to curb excesses. Some very long, inexcusably long, school shutdowns have occurred because of poor State supervision and assistance. We need fair and equitable State laws that protect students from undue disruption in the teaching-learning process.

Do the laws in your State -- if there are any -- call for the kind of mediation and arbitration activities that will bring about timely resolution of disputes and impasses at the bargaining table? This relatively new development in education needs your attention as a State board member.

Education of handicapped children is my fourth item of concern in today's world of education.

It is hard to believe that more than three million handicapped children are not being served by education in our country. Many parents of the handicapped have gone to court to compel recognition of the education needs of their children. State policy should respond to these needs without court action.

This matter is a source of great discussion and debate in the halls of Congress in Washington. It needs our united attention. Of all groups, our handicapped most deserve both our compassion and our support.

The fifth and last item on my list of performance gaps is a bit more difficult to describe and define than the others. It has to do with our standards, our measurements, our discipline, and our vigor in education.

It seems to me that as a people we are becoming spoiled and pampered. As a society, our preoccupation with <u>getting</u> has obscured <u>giving</u>. Perhaps we need to learn how to sacrifice and "tough it" --- how to discipline ourselves.

This leads to the question of how well organized, managed, and disciplined our vast American education enterprise might be. It is human nature to reach up and struggle when faced with a challenge. It is also natural for the human soul to be less buoyant and uplifted in the absence of this climate.

Almost three out of every 10 Americans are involved full time in education -- either as students or employees. We will spend more than $108 billion on education in the current academic year. How well this vast education entity is managed -- with what standards and disciplined performance -- will be largely determined by the quality of your leadership.

I believe firmly that when performance is measured, performance improves. I believe, moreover, that when performance is measured, and the results are reported back, the rate of improvement accelerates.

If we are to have a well managed system of education we must have standards by which we measure and determine our progress. If we are to become more productive in the United States we must become more disciplined. And this begins in our schools.

Our young people need to learn to look first at the end of their own right arm when they look for a helping hand. And this attitude must permeate the curriculum in a positive and reinforcing way -- not in a negative and threatening way. As we help we must strengthen. For help that replaces effort and rewards without effort is not in the long run beneficial to human beings. Our educational policies must build and strengthen self-reliance and self-confidence.

State boards of education should not hesitate to lay down the law on performance accountability as long as they do it in a positive, reasonable, and uplifting way, if they lead rather than drive -- if they recognize and reward more than they punish.

Many of you are called upon to approve many standards, to implement many legislative enactments that may or may not lead to improved quality, more vigor and discipline. The impact of your decisions will be deep and lasting.

Conclusion

The leadership responsibilities of State boards of education lead you inevitably into positions of controversy. As I see it, you should constantly hit at the weak points (such as those I have mentioned) and keep public attention on those critical items that are not in your power, but in the power of your State legislature, to change.

I urge you to take a long look at your present powers and perquisites, with a view to extending them. I urge you to look again at the qualitative change that has taken place in American society and American education and consider whether you just may have happened along at the right time, and legally armed, to fulfill a whole new order of actions along with the old. In educational history, the State board's time has come. You should leave no leadership prerogatives or any power vacuum for others to fill.

It is aptly said that the State legislature is actually the chief policy making body for American education. But you influence that policy while it is being made and lead in implementing it afterward.

You must be a very strong force in seeking legislation. And if you look at all the States from the national perspective -- as I must as U.S. Commissioner of Education -- I believe you will find the five major deficiencies I have emphasized high on the agenda for legislative action in most States. How effectively you build support for these needed changes will, of course, be contingent on how they are accepted by the people of your State.

The grassroots work of finding out what's needed, balancing competing needs, and recommending legislative action on the basis of priorities is not particularly comfortable employment. But it is essential because, as we all know, very few such efforts have been mounted even experimentally at the State level. If a State does not know where it is going in education, any road will get it there. But a State can arrive at a concensus through the people on what outcomes are highly desirable. Then the people of the State and its education community will have a road map that all can read and from which all can attain a certain sense of momentum and accomplishment.

State boards of education, as I see it, will have to be willing to face controversy, accept heated criticism, and hold for what is right when it is not popular to do so. But you can be the most powerful group in education if you will unite behind a few of the large longstanding issues.

When, for example, a State moves to an equitable school finance program, some long favored school districts may have to make some adjustments -- at least temporarily. When you stand up for this change you will be castigated.

And when you insist on school district boundary changes all the emotions of self interest will flood the halls of your legislature. There is no fight -- in my experience -- to compare with a school consolidation fight when the issue is dragged out on the floor of the senate or house of the State legislature. But someone has to get this done.

Both of these two longstanding problems must be solved before we turn to other matters. They will take you to center stage. There will be no question about what the State board of education is or who its members are.

In both an educational and political context, can you think of a better issue than providing adequate education of handicapped children in States where they have been excluded from school? This is an issue that is ripe for your intervention. Can we leave it until our three million unserved children receive educational services appropriate to their needs?

In States where there are no laws covering collective bargaining in public education, or where the laws are inadequate, this issue needs your intervention. You can surely use your State board muscle on it.

And when it comes to standards, matters of accreditation, and quality performance in education, you will find yourselves on the strong side of a good cause.

As we think of these great needs for educational leadership we must ask ourselves if we are ready to meet these enormous challenges.

What about State boards of education? Are you well equipped for the tasks you face? Who are State board members in the United States?

A 10-State study called State Policy Making for the Public Schools: A Comparative Analysis, edited by Roald Campbell and Tim Mazzoni, was completed in late August. It supplies some current descriptive data on State board members. Quoting from the study, which was a Title V ESEA project administered by Ohio:

> The typical board official among our respondents was white (94 percent), male (75 percent), and middle-aged (84 percent were 41 years or older). His occupation was to be found in business or the professions (70 percent). He was affluent (51 percent earned in excess of $30,000 annually) and was almost certain to be well educated (92 percent were college graduates; 58 percent held an advanced degree).

An earlier study by Gerald Sroufe found that the typical board member was Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, a civic-minded social liberal, and an economic conservative.

I hasten to note that none of the characteristics we've just looked at are as yet actionable offenses in this country, but we do need to remain quite conscious that that list of characteristics adds up to one other kind of thing -- again, not quite actionable -- and that thing is "the establishment."

As all of us have learned by now, being a part of the establishment isn't so bad once you get used to it. If the truth were told, it's really rather nice belonging. But since this profile reads as it does, am I wasting my time in inviting you to be activists and to help stir up an educational revolution on the five issues I have put before you?

Are you too much a part of the so-called establishment to be aggressive advocates of change? I hope not, and I think not. At least, in talking to the leaders of NASBE, I gained the impression that the time is ripe and that many of you are, in fact, ahead of me on these issues and on others that I did not mention because I was attempting to be conservative in what I recommended.

The five items I dealt with are a minimum, and they are universal in that they apply to urgent needs in most of the States. But these issues have stood too long -- far too long in the cases of school finance and school reorganization -- and they must have your urgent attention.

I close by expressing my high hopes for NASBE as a national organization. You have a fine, bright, able and youthful new executive secretary. Your officers are unusually able and dedicated. I see great things ahead for this organization.

I offer the best wishes of my colleagues in the United States Office of Education. It is a great privilege to me personally to serve you at this time as U.S. Commissioner of Education.

Finally, I want to remind you that USOE is <u>your</u> office of education. We want to work closely with you. Call on us to help. Your needs are our concerns. We respect you and wish you well in your very heavy responsibilities.

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